Book Review of Sperling, Stefan. 2013.Reasons of Conscience: The Bioethics Debate in Germany. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 333 pp.

Wahlberg, Ayo

Published in:
Medical Anthropology Quarterly

DOI:
10.1111/maq.12171

Publication date:
2015

Document version
Peer-review version

Published in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 29(2) p. b7-b8, 2 p.

Book review of: Reasons of Conscience: The Bioethics Debate in Germany, Stefan Sperling, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 333 pp.

Some of the most vivid passages in Stefan Sperling's ethnography of institutionalized bioethics in Germany are mundane, yet deeply detailed descriptions of the buildings, entrances, corridors, walls, offices, conference halls and printing rooms that were his field. Bioethics, he argues, is about the facilitation of organized reasoning, and this requires chairs, tables, desks, computers, paper and microphones. *Reasons of Conscience* is a timely and welcome contribution to a growing sub-field within science and technology studies as well as medical anthropology/sociology, namely the social study of (bio)ethics as a practice.

Over the last two decades, ethical governance of biomedical research has become perhaps as important and sanctioning an endeavor as the carrying out of rigorous, peer-reviewed research is itself. There are two important reasons for the rise of bioethics. First, biomedical research requires volunteer 'human subjects' – whether as donors of human biological material and biographic data, participants in clinical trials or recipients of experimental therapies – raising the specter of possible exploitation, misinformation and misunderstanding. Second, the much theorized 'molecular turn' within biology combined with advances in developmental biology have brought with them concerns about 'tampering' with human life while also raising questions about when human life begins and what rights should be bestowed upon human cells in all its forms. Bioethics then, as practiced by national ethics commissions, has emerged as a particular kind of response to these concerns. Different from the ethics review committees or institutional review boards which assess the ethical robustness of a specific biomedical research proposal, national ethics commissions have emerged as authorized 'stewards' of science directions. And as Sperling shows us, in Germany, such a deliberative space was carved out by two competing national ethics commissions.

Through his multi-sited ethnography, Sperling set himself the task of generating insight into how a specifically German style of ethical deliberation modelled on the *Saalordner* (i.e. neutral provider of order) could emerge. In such a style, ethics commissions are seen as having done their job when they have "succeeded in putting clamoring voices in perspective, clarified the positions, brought

the rights reasons into the discussion, and calmed previously turbulent debate" (p.48). At the same time, Sperling also works at length to historically locate Germany's style of ethical reasoning within its intellectually rich, politically turbulent and indeed traumatic past – from Enlightenment through Nazism, the Cold War and reunification. He suggests that the institution of the *Beamte* – state employees who have a duty to stand up for a liberal-democratic order and to uphold the law – can help us to understand the penchant for following rules, duties and a sense of order within German office-based bureaucracies, including those of ethics commissions. And he argues that Kant remains Germany's 'moral gold standard' when it comes to the inalienable defense of human dignity. Kant, Sperling argues, has been internalized into the German consciousness and externalized into forms of political participation such as citizen conferences or bioethical hearings.

Sperling's analysis is rich and wide-ranging if not scattered at times, and bearing in mind that the history of contemporary bioethics can in important ways be traced to the Nuremburg trials, *Reasons of Conscience* helps us to understand not just the form that bioethics takes in Germany, but also its very origins. Having set himself such a grand challenge as ethnographically accounting for the emergence of a specific style of ethical deliberation in Germany Sperling inevitably runs into numerous methodological as well as analytical challenges. As noted earlier, Sperling spent a lot of time in buildings, offices and seminar rooms which gives the monograph a distinct 'office ethnography'-feel with all the intrigues, micro-power struggles and mundane problems that office life often brings with it. I would go as far as to say that there a number of toe-cringing moments as Sperling bluntly recounts awkward and embarrassing moments experienced by his informants when inter-personal dynamics shaped the daily office routines that make up life at an ethics commission (see chapter 2 in particular). More importantly however, since Sperling's purpose is to in some ways provide an account of an entire nation's "conscience", it is at times hard to follow the ways in which he mobilises personal experiences (e.g. discussions with his grandmother), media coverage and parliamentary debates to build a case for arguing that, for example, "Kant, we may say, *is* the German conscience" (p.157). Is ethnography equipped to generate the kind of data required to, in a sense, psychoanalyse an entire nation's conscience, attitude or morals? While I do think Sperling succeeds in generating fascinating insights into the practices of institutionalized bioethics in Germany as a particular style, I am less convinced that his ethnography can tell us something about the entire nation's conscience.

Published in *Medical Anthropology Quarterly* 29(2) p. b7-b8, 2 p.

Ayo Wahlberg

Department of Anthropology, University of Copenhagen